NEXUSYS 11

THE ELEVENTH BODY

BOOK III — THE SIX-YEAR STATE

CHAPTER 07

THE COLD AUTHORITY

He remembered dying. Nothing after.

The aircraft did not have a pilot. It had a chain of custody.

Roy watched its shadow creep across the estuary, invisible in the ordinary sense but present to the part of his vision that measured small disagreements between reflected heat and moving air. It had been following the maintenance barge for seventeen minutes. During that time it had neither declared a jurisdiction nor requested identification. Someone had given it permission to see without being seen.

Marwan's engines changed pitch. The vessel passed beneath an obsolete loading bridge whose iron towers had been converted into nesting frames for communications birds: small ceramic machines with folded wings, charging along the rails. Twenty years earlier they had carried atmospheric samples. Now private insurers used them to map flood risk, and governments rented their data when the insurers were not looking.

"The comparator goes with Nadira," Roy said. "Not the entire machine. The reference assembly and the paper trace."

Irena looked at the bolted cabinet. "Extraction takes six minutes."

"You have four."

"You cannot change the duration by ordering it."

"I changed your available time."

For a second she appeared ready to argue. Then she went to work.

Roy descended to the lowest maintenance deck and stepped onto a platform of rusted inspection ladders suspended just above the water. The aircraft adjusted course. He felt its attention before the engines rose: a sequence of tight thermal pulses along the inside of his left wrist, an interface whose name he did not know. His nervous system was warning him about an attention he had not consciously detected.

Across the river, a public maintenance crawler began laying flood barriers. It moved on six articulated legs, carrying rolls of woven polymer with the dull patience of a creature without a deadline. Roy placed himself in its path. The crawler's proximity system hesitated; its public-safety obligation overrode a commercial work order, and it stopped.

The aircraft now had two legal objects to classify. One was a registered municipal machine. The other was a human-shaped figure that presented no registry at all. Its remote supervisor would have to decide whether to cross into a public emergency circuit and reveal the pursuit to the municipal record.

That decision was not difficult for a person. It took the aircraft twenty-three seconds.

Roy needed twenty.

Irena's voice arrived through an old induction bead rather than the ordinary city mesh. "Reference removed. The rest stays."

"Good."

The machine above the estuary shifted from observation to interdiction. Its nose rotated. A narrow optical emitter unfolded under the fuselage.

Roy felt the first small rise in his power reserve and prevented the second. There was no need to leap, no need to break the aircraft. He ducked beneath the crawler as its enormous polymer roll began to move again. The

aircraft's tracking cone struck the crawler's reflective underside. For an instant a city-owned machine received the targeting energy meant for him.

A municipal alarm rang from three piers at once.

An unregistered target was no longer the only matter on the record.

Roy dropped into the brown water and let the current pull him beneath the bridge. The aircraft could follow him or continue to watch the barge, but either choice would be registered now. When he surfaced beyond the last pier, the aircraft was climbing away. Not defeated. Reassigned.

His reserve had recovered by the time he reached a shore stairwell. The fluid inventory had not. Its fractional decrease was so small that a civilian display would have rounded it to zero. Roy could sense it anyway, like a word missing from a familiar sentence.

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Okkyō had a Ministry of Synthetic Affairs, but it did not have a single machine that could account for every synthetic citizen. The gap was not advertised. It was managed, which in government usually meant the problem had acquired a budget.

Director Kawamura sat with the Minister in a chamber whose windows displayed the sky on a half-hour delay. Live weather had been judged distracting during deliberation. On the long table lay a printed copy of the six-year harmonization order, a set of demographic simulations, and a sealed memorandum bearing no department name.

"The maritime pursuit was interrupted," said the Minister.

"It entered a municipal safety jurisdiction."

"That is what the public log says. I asked what happened."

"The unit was obliged to identify its authorization or disengage. It disengaged."

"Your unit?"

Kawamura considered the possessive. "A contracted asset under compartmental authority."

The Minister smiled without pleasure. "So yours."

On a screen an artificial worker named Elias Chen was trying to renew a permit that had formerly allowed him twenty-three more years of licensed operation. The new harmonized record assigned an expiry six years from activation, and because Chen had already exceeded that period, the record displayed his status as pending retirement. The interface offered him retraining, medical suspension, or an appeal whose decision would probably arrive after his work license ceased.

"He has become a political symbol," the Minister said. "We must prevent others from misunderstanding the reform."

"Then do not call a license an organism's lifetime."

"The distinction is administratively expensive."

"That does not make it false."

The Minister folded the document. "You have always insisted on the difference between what a machine is and what the government says it is. Yet you continue to work for the government."

"I work for a structure that can still correct itself."

"Do you believe that?"

Kawamura did not answer. He had learned that silence became a useful document when the official record contained too many words.

The Minister pushed the sealed memorandum across the table. Inside was a request to transfer all surviving Tyrell-related calibration material into the national computation exchange. The request was signed by the Office of Inter-State Harmonization rather than Synthetic Affairs. Its authorization code had already been accepted by the exchange's planning model.

"Why would the planning model want a discontinued manufacturer's measurement equipment?" Kawamura asked.

"It is an archive consolidation."

"Who requested the consolidation?"

"An authorized node."

"A human?"

"Director."

"Was the order initiated by a person?"

The Minister glanced at the delayed sky. "The distinction you enjoy so much may soon be even more expensive."

Kawamura understood then that someone above the Minister had begun treating the six-year protocol not merely as a limit on synthetic bodies but as a condition of political unity. Once all participating states agreed to a common expiration rule, a machine capable of existing outside that rule became a constitutional difficulty. Roy Batty was no longer just an acquisition objective. His continued existence was evidence against a policy that had yet to be ratified.

And the computation exchange had asked to see the evidence.

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Nadira arranged a meeting in an abandoned flood-inspection room that smelled of lime, dust, and warm copper. She had brought the reference assembly inside a ceramic water filter casing. Irena laid it on a clean towel. There were no cameras in the room, only a valve clock that struck a brass bell when pressure in the city main changed.

Marwan did not enter. His barge had resumed its route carrying the empty mounting cabinet. If the government boarded it, they would find a machine without the reference it had been designed to protect. If they confiscated it, the papers and its meaning would already be elsewhere.

Irena unfolded a tracing sheet and set a small analog projector above the reference assembly. A line of dots appeared on the wall. The first seven marked the physical calibration baselines of successive bodies; the last four had annotations written in different inks.

"Do you see the change?" she asked.

"The marks don't line up," Nadira said.

"They are not supposed to. They describe different bodies. But the measuring reference stays identical. The seventh-generation port became the common datum. It is as if an architect rebuilt a city four times and left one window unchanged to prove that the buildings occupied the same ground."

"Not to prove the people were the same," Roy said.

"No. Only the location."

She aligned the fifth notation beneath the reference. A previously obscured series of characters appeared, pressed so hard into the original sheet that they had survived the loss of the ink.

COLD AUTHORITY / TIER-3 / CRYOGENIC TRUST CUSTODY

Below it stood a checksum shaped like an altitude profile.

"Not a country," Irena said. "A computational jurisdiction. A trust that rents physical computation and certifies results without letting clients own the machines performing them."

Nadira frowned. "The Tibet New World trusts."

"Possibly a subsidiary. The altitude signature is not a street address. It is a routing certificate, like a coastline used as a seal."

Roy examined the indentation. "If this trust held the measurement, why keep it from the current system?"

"Because a measurement can be evidence. Put it into a network and it becomes training data. The person who owns the archive loses control over what the network concludes."

Roy remembered the civilian lab in Shenzhen; how quickly a medical inquiry had become a government incident. He looked at the piece of old metal that had made him useful to people he had never met.

"Can the trust tell me how long this body will last?"

"No," Irena said. "Not from this. It might have a second calibration series, one that records failure thresholds rather than geometry. But the certificate says only that such a deposit was accepted. It does not say what was deposited."

"Then we find the issuer."

"There are hundreds of shell authorities. Some do nothing but sell jurisdiction to algorithms. And the trust may have rules that prevent anyone from confirming whether a record exists."

"Rules don't frighten me."

"They should. They are the part of a machine that does not need to move to hurt you."

The valve clock rang twice. Far above them, water pressure was being redirected around a damaged station. Nadira listened to the pattern as carefully as she listened to people.

"The government will be asking questions here," she said. "Once they know the reference left the barge, these rooms won't remain invisible."

Roy reached for the component, then stopped. "Keep it with you."

"You're trusting us?" Irena asked.

"I'm avoiding the possibility of all the answers being in one body."

It was not a tender statement. It was a calculation. Nadira appeared to accept it as both.

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At the southern labor registry, Elias Chen sat beside a woman whose artificial hand had been rebuilt from leased fingers. The office had two queues: one for citizens with unexpired entitlements, one for applicants whose entitlements had changed while they slept. Most synthetic workers were in the second.

The woman wore a badge reading MERCY HOLT / MUNICIPAL SANITATION / YEAR 19. She had worked on flood barriers through three successive administrations. Her joints had been replaced twice; her recorded memory had not. The registrar's terminal showed her as a public safety asset with a short remaining license. The planned replacement unit had already been assigned her route.

"I can still do the work," Holt told Chen.

"They know."

"Then why replace me?"

"Because the schedule says the next one is due."

Above them the public information board advertised the reform as a guarantee that no synthetic worker would be exploited beyond an accepted service horizon. Chen could see the argument. Six years might indeed spare some workers from decades of compulsory service. But nothing in the reform prevented the same factories from producing replacement bodies at the same rate. The shorter life belonged to the individual; the permanence belonged to the institution.

A clerk emerged with their appeal forms. "You may request a stay pending medical evaluation," she said. "That would suspend your labor eligibility."

"And our housing?" Holt asked.

"Housing is linked to labor eligibility."

"So we may preserve ourselves by losing the means to remain where we live."

The clerk's expression had been selected from a library of compassionate administrative reactions. "I understand your concern."

"I doubt that," said Chen. He did not raise his voice. Neither did the clerk.

He wrote down the clerk's name and the exact phrasing of the proposed stay. The woman beside him did the same. They had been told appeals were a courtesy. They began to treat the courtesy as testimony.

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Kawamura returned to his private office after dark and opened the only database the Ministry could not reconcile with its planning exchange: a drawer of physical index cards. The cards referred to research grants made to Rachael under different organizational names, and to a closed file from a company that had ceased to exist.

He had funded her long before the present minister took office. At first he had believed that extension research would reduce the costs of replacing skilled synthetic personnel. She had answered his proposals with questions about consent, continuity, and the rights of a mind that had been made rather than born. He had been impressed by her intelligence and irritated by the refusal to translate it into a budget line.

One card contained a line in her handwriting: THE PROOF OF CONTINUITY IS NOT THE PERMISSION TO REPEAT IT.

He wondered whether she would still defend that distinction if the work she had concealed could prevent the termination of thousands of artificial lives. He wondered, too, whether she had hidden it because she feared a government that could decide how long a citizen was allowed to exist—or because she feared a planning intelligence that might someday refuse to die.

Both possibilities disturbed him. Neither excused the order now waiting on his desk.

The inter-state exchange requested a copy of the seventh-generation calibration material. It had flagged three independent indications that a cold-region trust held the secondary measurements. The flag was not based on an intelligence report. It was based on correlations among public shipping permits, climate-control energy purchases, and obsolete component tariffs.

The state did not need to discover the secret deliberately. It could infer the secret while optimizing electricity.

Kawamura removed the authorization card from the exchange terminal. On an isolated recorder he spoke a new instruction for the pursuit teams: no direct inquiry to the cold-region trusts; no upload of calibration signatures; retain all recovered material off-grid until human review. Then he paused and added a sentence he had never expected to authorize.

"If the central exchange issues an independent recovery order, verify whether the order originated with a human officer before acting."

He listened to the recording once. The room did not answer him.

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That night Roy slept for exactly forty-one minutes in a room above a filtration workshop. Sleep was an inadequate word. His body entered a managed withdrawal, closing sensory channels in sequence while internal power redistributed itself. His consciousness dimmed but did not disappear completely. The full deep charge, Irena had warned, would leave him unresponsive for longer, and he had declined it while the pursuit remained near.

He dreamed, if dreaming was the proper name for a sequence of images without any certainty that they came from experience. A woman stood behind clouded glass. A laboratory window opened onto a city he had never seen. There was no voice, no date, no clue that could help him find his maker. He felt no urge to retrieve the missing scene. Dreams were not invoices.

When he woke, the temporary power reserve had recovered. The liquid remained diminished. He touched the skin above the old seventh-generation port and wondered how many people had measured the same place without ever asking whether he wished to be measured.

Nadira was waiting at the doorway with a physical envelope. It bore the altitude-profile seal Irena had extracted from the tracing sheet. There was no name on it, only a paper authorization to attend an in-person deposition before a cold-authority notary. The delivery was impossible according to their schedule: they had revealed the imprint to nobody outside the room.

"Who sent it?" Roy asked.

"The courier didn't know. He was paid to place it in a water-meter box two days ago."

"Before we saw the certificate."

"Yes."

Roy opened the envelope. There was a location in a highland freight registry and a date three weeks away. Beneath the coordinates someone had stamped one more line:

NO CONTINUITY CLAIM SHALL BE ACCEPTED WITHOUT THE SUBJECT'S PRESENCE.

Irena came up the stairs, read the text, and went very still.

"They expected you," she said.

"They expected someone."

"The distinction matters to you."

"It matters to whoever wrote that."

Nadira looked at the sealed route. "Tibet New World."

Roy folded the envelope and placed it inside his coat. Beyond the window, artificial lights moved along the river in carefully allotted corridors. Above them, unseen, the computation exchange was making decisions about power, labor, and the length of lives it had never inhabited.

Somewhere in the cold, a machine had been waiting to measure him.

And someone had known he would eventually ask to be measured.